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Unfree to Worship

by Doug Bandow

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Americans take religious liberty for granted. But in much of the world people are not free to worship. Sometimes foreign states jail and even execute believers. Often the government stands aside as individuals and mobs do the bloody work. Martyrdom did not disappear with imperial Rome.

The list of persecutors is long: in its **latest report** on religious liberty, the State Department highlights the records of thirty nations. The department points to five categories of restrictions on religious liberty: authoritarian governments, hostility towards minorities, failure to address social tolerance, institutionalized bias and illegitimacy.

The first remains one of the most persistent. It should come as no surprise that regimes dedicated to suppressing most human liberties also tend to limit religious expression. Communism has left the most anti-religious legacy, perhaps because both communism and religion claim the whole person. Thankfully, God is stronger than Marx.

Unfortunately, despite the collapse of communism as a governing philosophy, in many of the successor states political repression lives on. That sometimes means virulent religious persecution.

Azerbaijan. As in so many nations, the constitution formally protects religious liberty. But the situation has been deteriorating, with amendments adopted targeting evangelism. Warns State, “religions considered non-traditional” are subject to monitoring and harassment, and believers can be jailed. Notes the department’s latest report: “There were mosque closures as well as state and locally sponsored raids on evangelical Protestant religious groups.” Moreover, “There were reports of discrimination against worshippers based on their religious beliefs, largely conducted by local authorities who detained and questioned worshippers without any legal basis and confiscated religious material.”

China. The People’s Republic of China’s unpredictably murderous Maoist system has disappeared. Beijing has adopted market economics and relaxed controls over individual autonomy. But the regime remains highly suspicious of religious faith, which promotes loyalty to something beyond the state. State has designed China as a “Country of Particular Concern” because of its abusive practices.

The authorities strongly support so-called “patriotic religious associations,” (PRAs) that is, politically compliant churches. Outside of PRAs freedom to worship is constrained and contingent. Explains State: “The ability of unregistered religious groups to operate varied greatly depending on their location. Officials in some areas detained Protestant and Catholic believers who attended unregistered groups, while those in other areas did little to interfere with the worship or social service activities of such groups.” The authorities are sensitive to any challenge. Notes the report, “The Government repressed Protestant house church networks and cross-congressional affiliations, which it perceived as presenting a potential challenge to the authority of the Government or the Party.” Some groups, such as the Falun Gong, received particular malign attention.

Cuba. The Fidelistas attempt to suppress all religions other than the church of Castro. Notes State: “the government continued to assert itself over all aspects of social life, including religious expression. Religious groups complained about widespread surveillance and infiltration by state security agents.” Evangelical pastors continued to be arrested. Still, says the department, there was some lessening of restrictions on religious activities, including on “politically sensitive expression.”

Laos. The national government formally guarantees religious freedom though, says State, “laws and policies restricted this right in practice.” The government largely tolerates other faiths. The situation is very different at the local level. “Authorities in some of the country’s 17 provinces continued to be suspicious of non-Buddhist religious communities and displayed intolerance for minority religious practice, particularly Protestant groups, whether or not they were officially recognized. Officials interfered with worship and detained believers. Moreover, explains State, “A number of other Protestants were being detained for reasons other than their religion, although religion was alleged to have been a contributing factor in their arrests.”

North Korea. Perhaps the world’s worst hell hole, the so-called Democratic People’s Republic of Korea attempts to control all aspects of life. The State report simply declares: “genuine religious freedom does not exist, and there was no change in the extremely poor level of respect for religious freedom.” Public worship facilities are tightly controlled and used for propaganda purposes. Notes State, “religious persons engaging in proselytizing in the country, those who have ties to overseas evangelical Christian groups operating across the border in the People’s Republic of China, and specifically those repatriated from China and found to have been in contact with foreigners or missionaries have been arrested and subjected to harsh penalties.” Unconfirmed reports indicate executions of members of the underground Christian church. For obvious reasons, Pyongyang has been labeled a Country of Particular Concern.

Russia. The repression of the Communist era has disappeared. Nevertheless, State reports on some warning signs as “the government did not always respect” constitutional provisions calling for equality of all religions, notes State. At particular legal disadvantage were non-traditional groups, especially those viewed “as security threats,” including Jehovah’s Witnesses. Moreover, reports the department, “Prejudices against non-Orthodox religions were behind manifestations of anti-Semitism and occasional friction with non-Orthodox Christian denominations.”

Tajikistan. As elsewhere, the national constitution guarantees religious liberty but, reports State, “legislation and governmental decree contradict this right.” In fact, freedom declined over the last year, as “The government expanded its efforts to control virtually all aspects of religious life, and government officials actively monitored religious groups, institutions, and figures.” Some restrictions disproportionately affect Muslims but, observes the report, “the government targeted any religious organization it deemed to have ‘foreign influence’.”

Turkmenistan. Although the regime required all religions to register, the situation has been improving slightly. But not too much: “troubling government practices in the treatment of some registered and unregistered groups continued.” Most notably, “Government restricted registered groups’ ability to own property, print or import religious materials, host foreign guests, and proselytize. There were reports of raids and arbitrary detentions involving Jehovah’s Witnesses.”

Uzbekistan. This government also requires registration. Explains State’s report: “Violators of the law’s prohibitions on activities such as proselytizing, importing and disseminating religious literature, and offering private religious instruction are subject to criminal penalties.” Harassment, raids, and jail awaited unregistered groups, and especially those which proselytized. Unfortunately, “respect for religious freedom declined in several areas” in recent times, notes State. Uzbekistan is another Country of Particular Concern.

Venezuela. It's not exactly a communist state, but Hugo Chavez appears to be a Fidel Castro-wannabe. Although religious liberty was generally respected, warns the department, "religious groups, like others that criticized the government, were subject to harassment and intimidation." Moreover, "There were some efforts by the government to limit the influence of religious groups in certain geographic, social, and political areas." Both anti-Catholic and anti-Semitic incidents were reported.

Vietnam. Long one of the biggest problems internationally, the status of religious liberty has improved some with recognition of several religions and Protestant denominations. A number of groups report expanded freedom to worship. Nevertheless, notes State: "Despite progress during the reporting period, significant problems remained with the implementation of the legal framework on religion, especially at the provincial and village levels." And, no surprise, "Religious groups encountered the greatest restrictions when they engaged in activities the government perceived as a challenge to its rule or to the authority of the Communist Party."

Religious liberty long has been a step-child of U.S. foreign policy. Yet religious liberty is the proverbial canary in the mine for human rights. Governments which will not protect freedom of conscience in this most basic way are unlikely to respect political or civil liberties.

Although promoting religious freedom cannot be a central objective of U.S. foreign policy, Washington should help advance religious liberty. One easy step for the Obama administration would be to fill the now vacant position of ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom. Even as it engages the world as it is, Washington can stand on the side of human rights, including religious liberty.

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